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Against Relativism: Cultural Diversity and the Search for Ethical Universals in Medicine.

By RUTH MACKLIN. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999. Pp. xii + 290. \$32.95.

When, if ever, is it acceptable for a westerner to disapprove of the practice of “female circumcision,” when it is estimated that between 85 and 115 million women have undergone the procedure, and when it is practiced in 26 African countries for cultural, religious, and social reasons, with a prevalence rate of up to 99 percent? How important is it to seek to refer to this practice in value-neutral terms, rather than using the emotive term “female genital mutilation”? Who has the right, beyond those persons belonging to the culture in question, to judge or criticize such practices?

As one of the preeminent moral philosophers and bioethicists of the Western world, Ruth Macklin is well qualified to explain the role of ethical discourse in identifying points of disagreement over the morality and defensibility of human conduct and seeking resolution to conflict where possible. But as she points out in this her latest work, in the context of cross-cultural judgments an additional step is required:

namely, the task of showing that ethical concepts and perspectives from outside of one's own culture or value-system are acceptable and applicable to the culture under scrutiny. In this book Macklin rejects the challenge that those not of a culture are unqualified and unwelcome in commenting on that culture, and she seeks rather to defend a position of judging certain cultural practices by bringing ethical principles to bear upon them—which principles, she contends, are universal in application across the cultures and communities of the world. While Macklin does not deny the existence of cultural relativism or diversity as a phenomenon, she does question whether its existence leads inexorably to the conclusion that there is no role for the view that a universality of ethical values exists against which particular cultural practices might be measured and found wanting. She admirably defends her position that such a role can not only be made out, but that it should be exercised in the interests of encouraging moral progress in the cultures of the world.

Macklin's work is set in the context of a broader defense of the notion of universal human rights, and more particularly in the context of human health as a human right. Chapters 1 to 3 give an account of the various arguments and views currently surrounding ethical relativism, while Chapters 4 to 8 offer specific examples of practices in the health care setting which might be defended on the grounds of cultural relativism. A full gamut of topics is covered, including the dynamics of the physician/patient relationship, the meaning and role of autonomy in health care decision-making, truth-telling in the context of terminal disease, confidentiality and privacy concerns, cultural variations in the definition of death and the consequences of these definitions for transplantation programs, the rhetoric of reproductive rights, and the ethics of international research and experimentation. Chapter 9 discusses health and human rights as an intellectual construct and an emerging legal and bioethical discipline, while Chapter 10 represents the culmination of this work's central theme, which is a response to the concerns of those who "recogniz[e] cultural diversity and the value of tolerance, [but who] genuinely wonder how we can talk of human rights and at the same time accept the thesis of ethical relativism" (p. 269).

In mounting her thesis, Macklin offers a plethora of examples from cultures across the globe. She draws on a wealth of personal experience of studying these cultures at first hand, although she admits to methodological inadequacies in her studies and freely doubts the statistical significance of many of her results. But Macklin is a philosopher and not a social scientist. Her aim is not to provide anthropological survey evidence of diverse cultural practices, but rather to make her philosophical position less open to attack as too conceptual, acontextual, obscurantist, and insufficiently grounded in reality. In this she succeeds in large measure, although at times her accounts of the cultural practices can verge on the anecdotal, relating only tangentially to her central philosophical thesis.

That thesis holds that without general ethical principles there is no systematic way to justify ethical judgments of cultural practices. Not only does Macklin defend this as a legitimate exercise, but she maintains that "without principles we cannot have moral progress" (p. 24). For her, "moral progress" is measured by "the changes in laws in the direction of greater humaneness and respect for humanity in every person" (p. 252). In essence, Macklin's work represents as much a defense of traditional principlism as it does an attack on relativism. As a basis for her thesis she draws on anthropological notions of "universals": that is, values that transcend and pervade all human cultures, even when the manifestation of those values in

particular cultures might vary between cultures and might indicate—at least to the unreflective observer—that irreconcilable value-systems are at work. An example is the principle of respect for persons, evidence of which Macklin finds in most of her cultural examples. Indeed, she balks at the polarization of representations that beleaguers the current cultural relativism debate wherein autonomy-driven reasoning typifies “Western” ethics and the primacy of communitarianism is seen as the kernel of “Eastern” ethics. Macklin refuses, however, to engage with the post-modern naysayers who would deny the existence of these universals. This she sees as a futile exercise. Instead, she assumes the value of these universals and proceeds to show how they can be found in a wide range of cultural practices, and how their presence offers a basis for the adverse judgment of those practices as lacking in moral progress. Thus, the reader will not find a defense of the fundamental premises upon which Macklin’s work is based. This is to be regretted, for her thesis is a fascinating one, yet it is one that she has unfortunately left open to challenge, not just from the postmodernists or the legions of the politically correct, but also from those who would question the source of her universals and their content. Even if one finds oneself in agreement with Macklin’s overarching hypothesis, one is left to wonder nonetheless about its practical content and philosophical foundations.

Bioethics today is a global activity, and this cross-cultural critique of the role of that discipline across the globe and in the cultures of the world is a welcome addition to the debate on cultural relativism. It deserves a wide readership and will be of interest to physicians, ethicists, anthropologists, public health workers, and lawyers alike. Institutionally, this book is of considerable relevance to the work of the National Institutes of Health, the National Bioethics Advisory Commission, and the Department of Health and Human Services, none of which can afford to seek comfort in the seemingly secure realm of “American bioethics.” If Macklin has one message for us, it is this: bioethics is a concern for humanity in toto. We are all jointly engaged in an enterprise towards moral progress for individuals and communities alike. A brief look at ourselves and others reveals that we all “stand in need of improvement” (p. 266).

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